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Science Takes on Sexual Assault

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Naval Health Research Center Public Affairs



170426-N-AN781-014 BETHESDA, Md. (April 26, 2017) Service members and civilians gathered to observe Denim Day at Naval Support Activity Bethesda. The event was a U.S. Army led program focused on sexual assault prevention. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class William Phillips/Released)

Naval Health Research Center (NHRC) hosted a Sexual Assault Awareness and Prevention Month (SAAPM) activity April 27, to highlight the important role that science and research have in preventing sexual assault.

“In order to prevent sexual assault, we need to understand what puts people at risk,” said Cindy Thomsen, Ph.D., health and behavioral sciences department head at NHRC. “To do that, we need research.”

Research, said Thomsen, is powerful because it provides empirical evidence for solving problems. Instead of guessing at what strategies or interventions might prevent sexual assault, researchers design scientific studies that produce actual evidence of what does work.

“Science enhances our knowledge and understanding of the world,” Thomsen added. “It gives us

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important background knowledge to inform our decisions. Scientific research has implications for issues we face every day and fuels advancements in technology and breakthroughs in health and medicine.”

Sexual assault research throughout the Department of Defense (DoD) became a topic of interest in the 1980s and the DoD Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office (SAPRO) was formed in 2004. Research conducted by SAPRO informs their work in sexual assault response and prevention and has led to important changes for victims of assault including restricted reporting, the Special Victims’ Counsel, and expedited transfers.

A special guest at NHRC’s SAAPM event was Ms. Jeannette Casillas, sexual assault response coordinator for Naval Base Point Loma.

“We go beyond that one month out of the year,” said Casillas. “We are here every single day of the year to eradicate sexual assault.”

Casillas emphasized the importance of gathering statistical data to increase knowledge and better inform efforts to prevent sexual violence and support victims.

Currently, sexual assault research in the military does just that by focusing on the effects of sexual assault on victims, prevention strategies, and risk factors for victimization.

“Well-conducted research is crucial to military readiness and force fitness,” said Thomsen. “In order to better serve the needs of victims and strengthen military readiness, future research efforts must examine the dynamics of the link between sexual harassment and sexual assault, investigate the effects of sexual assault on different types of victims, and study environmental contexts to better understand how we can change military environments to make sexual assault less likely to happen.”

By leveraging research and scientific analysis, existing prevention and response programs can be improved. Examining victims’ experiences with sexual assault response systems and programs gives decision-makers vital information to ensure these programs are working well and providing victims with the necessary support. Evaluating current prevention and response efforts, such as trainings and bystander intervention programs, helps leaders better understand if current efforts are truly effective and what changes may be needed to achieve maximum impact.

“The events the military hosts throughout the month of April that raise the profile of sexual assault issues and educate our personnel are very important, but we need to make sure that we continue our efforts throughout the year,” said Capt. Rita Simmons, commanding officer of NHRC. “To create a culture of consent, it’s imperative that we keep reminding our shipmates that sexual assault is unacceptable. We need to emphasize respect and accountability. And we need to do this every month, every week, and every day.”

As the DoD’s premier deployment health research center, NHRC’s cutting-edge research and development is used to optimize the operational health and readiness of the nation’s armed forces. In proximity to more than 95,000 active duty service members, world-class universities, and

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